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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

This has been revised after consultation with George Carver, [redacted] and DD/I. I believe they are now satisfied with it.

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[redacted]

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Director
National Estimates

Attachment

cc: DDCI

18 January 1968
(DATE)

FORM NO. 1 AUG 54 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)

MORI/CDF Pages 2 thru 20

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S-E-C-R-E-T

C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 January 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Alternative Interpretations of Hanoi's Intentions

INTRODUCTION

1. There are several hypotheses concerning the progress of the war in coming months and the intentions of the Communists. Most of them can be argued plausibly, for and against, and can be supported by some evidence. None is capable of conclusive proof or disproof, mainly because the evidence is either insufficient or can be interpreted in various and often diametrically opposed ways.

2. For example, there is the question of whether the North Vietnamese are willing to "negotiate." Hanoi has declared that it "will" talk if the bombing of North Vietnam is stopped. It is idle to say that this represents no change of attitude whatsoever;

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic downgrading and declassification

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it is equally idle to assume that of itself it indicates an early end to the fighting. One may argue, quite plausibly, that Hanoi has finally comprehended that war against the power of the US can have but one ultimate conclusion, and is now probing to find out what US terms are. But one may also regard this latest statement simply as another political and psychological move to encourage dissent in the US and inflame world opinion against Washington.

3. In present circumstances it is true that any of a multitude of things could happen, at almost any time. Hanoi could quit tomorrow, or at any time thereafter; the Chinese could enter the conflict with their own armed forces in great number; China could collapse in total chaos; the Soviets could take a far more active role, either in support of Hanoi to continue the war or in withdrawing such support; the South Vietnamese government and polity could disintegrate; the Sino-Soviet controversy could become far more or far less acute than it is, and thus change the context of the Vietnam struggle; the policy of the US government could change in any of a number of ways, and so on.

4. A balanced estimate of the situation cannot rule these and other possibilities wholly out of consideration. The best it can do is to decide, on the basis of evidence and careful argument,

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that many of them are so unlikely as to be irrelevant, at least until more evidence appears, and that others should be held as possible qualifications and correctives in a net judgment. In the paragraphs that follow we attempt to show how the evidence and arguments may fit or not fit into alternative estimates of the prospects in Vietnam.

* * * * * *

5. There are three hypotheses under which the situation in Vietnam may be considered and to which most of the evidence may be related: (1) Hanoi has decided that it must terminate the fighting in the course of this year; (2) Hanoi still feels a good measure of confidence in its prospects and firmly intends to fight on until it perceives a break in its favor in US policy; (3) Hanoi is less certain of its prospects and is keeping several options open. It intends to continue hard fighting in the months ahead, but recognizes it may be advisable to seek a compromise solution within the next year, according to the way things develop.

I. PESSIMISM IN HANOI

6. The more solid evidence supporting the proposition that Hanoi intends to quit at an early date comes from an analysis of

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Communist prospects in South Vietnam. According to our view of the data, the leaders in Hanoi could conclude that their prospects in South Vietnam are steadily and surely diminishing. The toll on their forces is increasingly heavy; their losses cannot be reduced without undermining the effectiveness of their military and political operations; recruitment in South Vietnam is becoming more and more difficult, control over the population is diminishing, and morale is becoming more of a problem as the war continues without conclusive results. Even though such problems may not yet be critical, the overall effect is that the Communist position will be weaker at the end of 1968 than it is now. Military action can arrest the decline but cannot change it fundamentally.

7. Proceeding from this analysis, Hanoi's current efforts on the military and political fronts can be seen as one last push to gain the best possible terms in an early settlement. For example, it can be argued that Hanoi would not intentionally seek the bloody and costly battles that it has, unless it knew that the fighting would end fairly soon and replacements would not be a problem. Hanoi would not, under this hypothesis, commit part of its strategic reserve, unless it believed there would be no real threat of an invasion from the US. Nor would the North

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Vietnamese claim that 1968 would be "decisive" and lead to the formation of a "coalition" government unless they actually anticipated an early political settlement.

8. There are, of course, various other considerations or factors which could cause Hanoi to seek an early end to the fighting; some of these have some evidential base. Perhaps the burden of the war on North Vietnam is in itself a decisive factor. The leadership may find that the annual loss of young men, added to the sum of economic and material damage, is unacceptable in its implications for the future vigor and productivity of the nation. Our own view, however, based on a variety of sources and buttressed by the recent testimony [redacted] is that the strains of the war on North Vietnam are still well within manageable limits. 25X1

9. There are other possibilities which are no better than sheer conjecture, but which cannot be entirely excluded. For example, it could be that Moscow, concerned over a decline in Communist strength in Vietnam, a possible US invasion of the north, and greater Chinese involvement and influence in North Vietnam, is exerting pressure on Hanoi to end the war. Such pressure could have taken the form of a threat to terminate major military aid

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after the completion of the deliveries negotiated this past fall along with a promise to provide substantial aid for economic development once the fighting stops.

10. Pressures from Peking could also be responsible for a decision to end the fighting. The Chinese, for example, might have made their continued aid conditional on Hanoi's acceptance of Chinese advice on both military and political strategy.

11. Neither of these conjectures can be supported by any available evidence. Indeed, Peking and especially Moscow have appeared reluctant in the past to apply direct and heavy pressures on Hanoi; neither wants to force Hanoi into the embrace of the other. While Moscow, unlike Peking, is not committed to prolongation of the war, it has always seen some advantages in the fighting and has demonstrated no willingness to intervene with Hanoi in favor of early negotiations.

12. Alternatively, Hanoi may have concluded that the Sino-Soviet dispute will undermine effective aid. The USSR may be refusing to ship certain weapons through China, or to risk delivery by sea. Hanoi may anticipate that one of the Communist giants will insist that it take a clear cut stand in the dispute;

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this would place Hanoi in the position of alienating at least one side.

13. Another possibility is that the North Vietnamese leaders may have concluded that turmoil and disruption in China make it a poor prospect as a "reliable rear area." Hanoi may fear that China's antics are encouraging the US to escalate the war without fear of Chinese reactions. And Hanoi might even fear that the time will come when the Chinese will insist that North Vietnam begin its own "cultural revolution."

14. There is, of course, evidence of Hanoi's concern over the Sino-Soviet dispute and over China's internal policy. Last year the North Vietnamese Politburo and Central Committee apparently passed a resolution affirming Hanoi's neutrality in the dispute. Missions were sent to both Moscow and Peking to explain this position, which has been continually re-emphasized. At one point last year, Hanoi apparently had to become directly involved in ensuring that Soviet supplies transited more expeditiously through China. Hanoi also reacted to Mao's cultural revolution by issuing a fairly pointed criticism of Chinese behavior and the cult of Mao. Added to these concerns is the

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fairly open record of Chinese opposition to any hint of talks between Hanoi and the United States.

15. What is lacking, however, is any evidence that the tensions with China or the concern over Soviet support have reached the level where Hanoi would fear Soviet or Chinese disengagement. The physical evidence suggests that both Peking and Moscow are in fact increasing their aid.

16. If for any of the reasons discussed under this hypothesis Hanoi should decide to end the fighting, it would have at least two alternatives. It could simply decide to allow the conflict to die down, without seeking a political resolution. Or it could attempt to obtain the best possible terms for a settlement under the existing circumstances. In this latter case, the recent Trinh statement on talks with the US could be read as the first step in the gradual development of a negotiating position. The North Vietnamese, of course, would still bargain for favorable terms, but they would also recognize the need to be more forthcoming and to reduce their demands for a settlement. It would also make sense under this interpretation for Hanoi to get negotiations underway before

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rather than after the American elections, reasoning that during an election campaign it would have more room for maneuvering against the US. Hanoi's handling of the follow up to the Trinh interview will be a test for this hypothesis; if it is correct confirmatory evidence should become available before long.

II. CONFIDENCE IN HANOI

17. The North Vietnamese may be more impressed with their achievements in the past two years than with the problems they have encountered. They have withstood the massive American intervention in the South and the heavy bombing of the North. Despite the bombing, they now fight with more and better arms and ammunition, and their supply lines are more elaborately developed. The political infrastructure in the South has been maintained, even if in somewhat weakened condition. Their military effort, based on the increasing threat from the border areas, not only presents a new challenge to the US on the ground but also introduces new political complications for the Americans. Finally, of course, because of their experience with the ebb and flow of the French war, the natural inclination of the political leaders would be to exaggerate their own strength and expect the

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US to concede defeat rather than face the prospect of a protracted war.

18. Hanoi's determination to keep fighting could also be explained by what it believes are fundamental weaknesses in the American and South Vietnamese position. The Communists may be convinced that the Saigon regime has little chance of becoming an effective government, generally accepted by the people. Moreover, Hanoi may be persuaded that the South Vietnamese army will never develop into a fighting force which is effective enough to assume part of the US burden. Thus, even if the US military effort is highly successful, in the end the US will find it has no political base in South Vietnam and will be forced to conclude a political settlement with the Front.

19. Even if Hanoi does not read the situation in South Vietnam in this way, it may be relying on assurances of substantial external support which will enable the Communists to fight on effectively. The Chinese may have promised more logistical and air defense troops and even some combat units in order to meet any manpower needs in North Vietnam. The Soviets may have promised new weapons to cope with superior American fire power and the air and naval attacks on the North.

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20. Perhaps the best evidence in support of this general interpretation of Hanoi's outlook is the record of the past two years. At each phase of the US buildup Hanoi has been willing to respond by committing additional resources to the struggle in the South. A high level of infiltration has been maintained; the most recent deployments near the western end of the DMZ may express a determination not only to persist in the war, but to try for a decisive defeat of the US in some local battle. Hanoi's leaders have not taken advantage of several opportunities for negotiations; this could mean that they believe nothing can be gained at the bargaining table unless it has already been won on the battlefield. Finally, a committment to fight a protracted war was the main decision of the North Vietnamese Central Committee resolution of late 1965, was re-affirmed by the Central Committee in early 1967, and continues to be cited as basic policy.

21. As to evidence of external support, Hanoi has recently concluded a series of new agreements with its Communist allies. Moscow has openly promised a variety of weapons; Soviet coastal defense missiles could be the first of several new items on the list. New Chinese weapons have shown up in the Delta for the

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first time in the war. We known of no increases in Chinese troop strength in North Vietnam in recent months. Recent high level reaffirmations of pledges to support Hanoi, however, could be read as a willingness to increase Chinese commitments. And air defense cooperation between Hanoi and Peking has grown markedly in recent months.

22. We know of no evidence that is totally inconsistent with an intention to continue the war for some considerable period of time. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Hanoi would never draw down its home army and weaken the defense of North Vietnam if it looked forward to a long war, particularly in light of continuing concern over an American invasion. And it could be further argued that Hanoi would not tell the troops in the South that this would be a "decisive" year, if in fact it believed the war was likely to continue well beyond 1968. Finally, why Hanoi would want to keep alive hopes for negotiations, aggravating the Chinese in the process, if it had no intention of reaching a political settlement in the near future?

23. If Hanoi's mood and outlook is roughly as assumed under this hypothesis then its attitude toward peace talks is

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likely to be intransigent. Upon exploration, moves like the recent Trinh statement will come to nothing. Hanoi, of course, would welcome an end to the bombing, but will adamantly refuse to pay any price for it. Negotiations would be mainly to register the defeat of the US and the end of the Saigon regime.

24. Finally, one may conjecture that Hanoi's postulated confidence rests on some factor or event which is not yet apparent to the US, such as a major escalation by the Communists. This might take the form of a military offensive in Laos which would threaten to expand the area of conflict and further strain US resources in Southeast Asia. Or escalation might take the form of Chinese moves in Vietnam or elsewhere around its periphery. Or again, the North Vietnamese could be relying on the USSR to create a diversionary crisis, say in Berlin.

25. Such possibilities have been carefully considered almost since the beginning of the US intervention in Vietnam. Thus far, there is no persuasive evidence that Hanoi, Peking or Moscow intends to enlarge the war beyond Vietnam or take major action elsewhere against the US.

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III. SUSPENDED JUDGMENT IN HANOI

26. The third hypothesis assumes that Hanoi's estimate of the situation is based on a mixture of increased pessimism and continuing confidence, which are compounded by other factors, particularly the American elections. Under this hypothesis Hanoi is keeping several options open and will continue to do so at least until late spring or summer, when it should be in a better position to judge the effect of the American primaries and conventions and the results of its own military offensive. At that time Hanoi will also be better able to judge the effectiveness and durability of the Saigon government.

27. If this is so, Hanoi's winter-spring offensive is designed not only for its immediate military objectives but for its overall impact on the US. Hanoi would recognize that its chances for a military victory have evaporated, but it would still hope, by sustaining high levels of combat in the months ahead, to create the impression of a stalemate. It would not expect the US to capitulate, but it would see increased chances for a compromise on terms that would protect the Viet Cong infrastructure and provide the basis for a new political phase in the revolutionary struggle. Hanoi could not be confident of what the outcome of its

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own efforts will be. But it would recognize that the next twelve months provide an unusual opportunity because of the American elections.

28. Even if political overtures combined with military pressures do not bear fruit, Hanoi could reason that by agitating the question of a coalition government and contacts with the Front, the strains between Washington and Saigon will grow and the US will come under increasing international pressures to modify its own terms. In short, Hanoi would do what it could to maintain its military pressures, but would at the same time become more flexible in its diplomacy, waiting for some months more to decide whether to make the best deal possible, continue the war more or less along present lines, or even to adopt a radically different way of fighting, i.e., guerrilla warfare.

29. This hypothesis rests on a different reading of much of the same evidence already cited. Hanoi has made military decisions which strike some observers as inexplicable given the nature of their problems. Hanoi cannot possibly hope to drive the US into the sea and probably cannot expect another Dien Bien Phu. Thus, it would seem better advised to conserve its forces for a protracted war in which it would hope to sap the will of the US.

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Instead, the North Vietnamese commit more troops and seek costly battles. Moreover, since last July they do seem to have indicated more interest in maintaining private contacts with the US and, in some cases, actually inviting US negotiating probes -- moves which their rather rigid public position would not justify.

30. This hypothesis is supported by some negative evidence. For example, why should China be so cool to the new program of the NFL unless Peking senses that the revision of the program was a step toward a negotiating situation? Why did the Front try to send representatives to New York, if as Hanoi claims the UN has absolutely no business in the Vietnam question? And, above all, why do the captured documents contain intriguing tidbits suggesting that the war may not go beyond 1968? These contradictions or inconsistencies could be reconciled within the framework of this third hypothesis.

31. Uncertainty could also grow out of the state of relations with China and the USSR. In actual fact we know little of Hanoi's relations with its allies. What we do know is based on glimmerings from captured documents, deductions from overt statements and an occasional hint from

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Soviet sources. In any case, Hanoi cannot be very confident that Moscow and Peking will not fall into an even more bitter conflict, or that the situation inside China will not deteriorate further. Indeed, Hanoi could conclude that it would be better to explore US terms for a political settlement while China is still in some disarray rather than later, when the Chinese leadership might be reunified and tempted to interfere more directly in Hanoi's affairs.

32. Indications of uncertainty could also be reconciled with an even more extreme variant of this hypothesis, namely, that the North Vietnamese Politburo is badly divided and is pursuing an indecisive and at times contradictory policy. Perhaps, as Ho Chi Minh's health has declined, factionalism has reared its ugly head and led to a fairly even split between hawks and doves. Both factions could seek comfort and support from abroad, the hawks from Peking and the doves from Moscow. The hawks may insist on the need for further intensive military effort while the doves could be arguing for a shift to political tactics.

33. Though there is some evidence that the North Vietnamese leaders have engaged in debates over policy, mainly on the proper

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military tactics, there has never been sufficient evidence to conclude that the leadership is divided on basic policies of whether to fight or quit. A power struggle in Hanoi, of course, is a possibility after Ho and could be developing now. But the evidence is lacking, and this explanation of Hanoi's behavior seems highly unlikely.

34. Even less likely but still within the realm of the imaginable is a split between the Viet Cong and Hanoi. As Hanoi has assumed more of the burden and direction of the war, it may have alienated a faction within COSVN. The Viet Cong could argue, with support from certain figures in the Hanoi leadership, that all talk of negotiations is defeatism. Hanoi may suspect a Chinese bent in the Viet Cong, etc., etc. There may be actual divergencies between Hanoi and some of the Viet Cong leaders, but a real split should be excluded as unlikely.

* * * * * * *

35. As noted at the outset of this discussion we cannot rule out any of these three hypothetical explanations for Hanoi's behavior. It would certainly not be surprising if the North Vietnamese continued the war through next year and for some time

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afterward. It would be more surprising if they decided to end it soon. We believe there is much to recommend the third case: in the months ahead Hanoi will continue its military effort but will probe more intently to discover what the shape of a political settlement might be.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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Chairman

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